William Pierson Merrill

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BY

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# What About the Virgin Birth?

## By WILLIAM PIERSON MERRILL

THROUGH all the ages the Church has believed, with unbroken and unvarying conviction, that our Lord was born of a virgin, by direct act of the Spirit of God, and not by natural generation. Recently a considerable, and probably a growing, number have been led to doubt or question this fact. That this is more than a manifestation of scepticism is plainly evidenced by the devoutness, faith, and Christian character of many who raise the question.

Naturally the Church is agitated. To extremists, on the one hand, it seems incredible that any real Christian believers should doubt so well-established a fact. To extremists, on the other hand, it seems incredible that the Church should cling with such passion and tenacity to a fact of so slight importance. As always in time of controversy, rash words have been spoken, and hasty assumptions taken as fixed positions.

The great desiderata are that each side shall understand the other, and that all shall know the facts. There is need for conference, frankness, considerateness, patience, prayer, courtesy. It is no time for one-sided dogmatic assertions. No man who has not fairly and sympathetically faced the facts as the man on the other side sees them, has any right to judge. What impresses one most is the extent of blind, unreasoning dogmatism on the one side and the other, and the lack of calm, open-minded consideration of *all* the facts,—particularly the facts which seem to the other man to uphold his view.

It has seemed that a calm and brief survey of the facts might be helpful. It is too much to hope that the survey is complete. But the writer earnestly

hopes that all will see that it is honest and, so far as that is possible to a small human mind, free from bias. He has honestly tried to give all the facts which everybody ought to know.

### *Why Many Strongly Hold to the Virgin Birth*

1. Because it is directly and plainly stated as a fact in the Gospel narrative.

Here is a weighty reason for all who take the Bible as their authority. The Virgin Birth is plainly stated as an absolute fact, in a way that cannot be explained away by any sort of ingenuity. You cannot make anything else out of what is said in Matthew and Luke but that Jesus was born of a virgin, and not of human fatherhood.

2. The way the fact is stated is an additional argument. One who would account for it as a myth needs to compare the narrative in Matthew 1 and Luke 1 with the apocryphal gospels, or with myths of other religions, to see and appreciate the utter difference of spirit and style. The fact is given so simply, so delicately, so reverently, so beautifully, with so light a touch. The very atmosphere of sincere narration of fact breathes in it.

Worthy of note also, in this connection, is the fact that the stories of the Virgin Birth reflect so wonderfully the point of view of their time. Were they the creations of later thought or feeling, put back into the early accounts, they could scarcely have the flavor of pious Judaism, of apocalyptic hope and expectation, which so strongly tinges them. The angel's promise to Mary, Mary's hymn, the hymn of Zacharias, all these are exactly what devout Jews of the pre-Christian time would produce, what later Christian ages could not produce.

3. Impressive also is the acknowledged trustworthiness of one, at least, of the narrations. Critics object to Matthew as too greatly influenced by the desire to find fulfilments of prophecy. But more and more sound historical criticism tends to support strongly the trustworthiness and carefulness of Luke as a historian. The most conspicuous witness here

is Harnack, who holds that Luke wrote both the Gospel and the Acts, finished the Acts before the end of Paul's imprisonment (and therefore the Gospel still earlier), and is to be depended on as a careful historian. When such a writer makes so unequivocal a statement as that regarding the Virgin Birth, it is worthy of respect and careful attention.

4. A fourth reason why many strongly hold this fact is the unbroken testimony of the Church to it from the very beginning. One must be an individualist indeed, with little or no sense of the meaning of the Church, who would treat lightly or reject readily a fact or a doctrine held with such unanimity through the ages. Certainly the burden of proof is on those who would reject it.

5. A fifth reason should be mentioned, *sentiment.* We may discount sentiment, and call it irrational; but it is mighty and tenacious. Men and women do not want to give up this as fact. It seems so inwrought with art and literature, with prayer and worship and creed, with the exaltation of the mother and child throughout Christendom, that to many it seems a blessed and beautiful treasure, to question which is almost blasphemy.

We have but touched on these reasons. They are very strong. No one is prepared, however clear his mind on the matter, to question the fact of the Virgin Birth, who does not know and appreciate the force of these reasons, and is not prepared to give full and considerate and patient regard to them. A fact or a doctrine so strongly held, and for such reasons, is not to be lightly assailed or questioned.

## *Why Some Feel Compelled to Doubt It*

It is a simple fact that some sincere, reverent, devout men and women, Christians by every rightful test, feel that they cannot affirm the Virgin Birth as a fact.

It is easy to say that this is due to a prejudice against the miraculous, or to a naturalistic (or anti-supernaturalistic) bias, or to a lack of real faith in

the deity of our Lord. The plain answer is that these allegations are not true of many of those who doubt or question this particular fact. They believe heartily in the absolute deity of Christ and hold strongly to the possibility of miracles and the actuality of many of them. They are supernaturalists. Yet they hesitate to affirm the Virgin Birth as a fact of history; some of them positively disbelieve it.

Why is this? Here are some of the reasons. Every champion of the Virgin Birth should consider these reasons seriously, patiently, generously, lest he misjudge his brethren.

1. The lack of absolute clearness in the Scriptural testimony.

The New Testament itself raises questions. As we have said, nothing can be clearer than the statements in Matthew and Luke regarding the Virgin Birth. But careful, free-minded students of the Bible learn that we must take it all, and not trust to any one or two statements, however plain or positive. Certainly Biblical statements seem to conflict. Take a single instance: In the twenty-fourth chapter of Exodus we are told plainly and positively that some seventy men "saw the God of Israel." The statement could not be more flat and plain. It cannot be explained away. Later in the same book Moses is allowed to see Jehovah's back.

Yet a later writer says positively, "No man hath seen God at any time" (John 1:18.) We do not get the teaching of the Bible until we take both statements into the account. Then we understand that some very plain, straightforward statements may be poetical and imaginative, rather than literal.

Going on through the Gospels, we notice such facts as these:

a. Everywhere, save in these opening passages, Jesus is referred to as the "son of Joseph." There is not a hint of anything unusual in His birth. Mary herself speaks to Jesus of Joseph as "thy father."

b. Jesus' brethren did not believe in Him, and

they and His mother thought Him mad because of His high claims and public actions. Is such an attitude conceivable if they knew of His unique nature by birth?

c. It is strange, to say the least, that according to Luke, Mary is informed by the angel in advance of what is to come; yet, according to Matthew, Joseph knew nothing of it until so much time had elapsed that he noticed her condition. Is it conceivable that she would have said nothing to him of the message of the angel? She is said to have talked freely with Elizabeth. Why not with her betrothed?

d. The very Gospels which state the Virgin Birth give genealogies of our Lord which trace His descent through Joseph, not through Mary. Why should they do this, if the Virgin Birth were the accepted fact?

The object of the genealogies seems to be to show our Lord's descent from David. A good deal is made in the New Testament of Jesus' Davidic descent. Now there is clear evidence that Joseph was a descendant of David. There is not a shred of evidence that Mary was of David's line. Her relatives were of the tribe of Levi. If "our Lord sprang out of Judah," must it not have been through Joseph?

It is a sobering, arresting fact, that if one leaves out three verses in Matthew and two verses in Luke, the consistent, unvarying impression from those Gospels, as from the other two, is that Jesus was born as other men are, of a human father and mother.

All these facts can be dealt with, and explained. But their cumulative evidence, taken in their plain sense, is not light.

2. The silence of the rest of the New Testament.

The argument from silence is of course a precarious one. Because a writer does not mention something, does not prove that he did not know of it.

But when we find, as we do, that the Virgin Birth is absolutely ignored by Mark, John, Paul, and all the rest of the New Testament, it raises serious questions. Either they did not know of this doctrine, or

they ignored it. If they did not know of it, where was it? If they ignored it, how can it be considered an essential of Christianity? Here is Paul, giving his soul and his life to convincing the world of the deity of Christ. Yet not a word about the Virgin Birth. Here is John, definitely stating that he wrote his Gospel in order that men might believe "that Jesus is the Son of God;" yet he ignores a fact or doctrine which a recent writer declares so essential to faith in our Lord's divinity that one cannot have a divine Lord unless He was born of the Holy Spirit and a virgin. The silence of John and Paul does not disprove the fact of the Virgin Birth.. Of course not. But does it not decisively stamp it as unessential? What other conclusion is possible? Can we blame men for hesitating to accept as an essential and integral part of their faith something not mentioned by John, Paul, the author of Hebrews, and our Lord Himself?

3. The lack of practical and theological value.

The atonement, the resurrection, the deity of our Lord—these make a difference. We preach them. They take hold of our souls. What practical value has the fact of the Virgin Birth? Were souls ever saved by it?

What theological value has it? Theologians have tried to show that it has value for theology. Their arguments are at best plausible. They seem to many inconclusive.

a. It has been said that our Lord could not really be Son of God except through the Virgin Birth. But the true and accepted doctrine is not that Jesus became Son of God through His birth; but, as the Westminster Catechism finely puts it, that "the Son of God became man" by the process of birth.

A well-known preacher, in a sermon recently published, declares that the only way in which Christ could be Son of God was through having the Holy Spirit as His Father, and the Virgin Mary as His mother. The writer of those words was doubtless all unaware that he was falling into the Arian heresy, condemned at Nicaea sixteen hundred years ago.

The orthodox faith is not that the Son of God began to *be* nineteen hundred years ago, but that it was *God the Son* who then became man. Is there any philosophical reason why that could be accomplished through the use of one human parent, and not through the use of two? The wonder is God becoming man at all. Passing through the gate of normal birth is not in the least inconsistent with the incarnation. The birth from a virgin seems to have no necessary connection with the doctrine of our Lord's divinity.

b. It has been urged that the Virgin Birth was necessary in order to save our Lord from the taint of original sin which rests on all who proceed from Adam "by ordinary generation." But this seems to involve the monstrous notion that original sin comes wholly from the father; or the equally abhorrent idea that there is something inherently sinful in wedded love. In Jewish law it was the mother who was purified after childbirth. Roman Catholics try to escape this dilemma by declaring that Mary also was conceived of the Holy Spirit. But this only pushes the difficulty a step back. Given any human parentage at all, the human inheritance is there.

c. The claim has been made that, in order to have redemption, a new order of man was necessary: and that the Virgin Birth brought about this new humanity, giving a fresh start to the race, or to a part of it.

But to many this argument seems loose, inconclusive, and fanciful. Christ is indeed the second Adam, through whom believers enter a new experience of life, free from the drag of the old. But that experience is wholly and absolutely spiritual. If a new *physical* nature was necessary to start the new order of humanity, why was it not equally necessary that that new physical nature be transmitted? It is in the Spirit that Christ makes us new men; how does the question whether He had one human parent or two affect that spiritual transformation, or His power to bring it about in us?

Theologians have so far failed to make out a convincing case for the theological importance of the

Virgin Birth. And it is not hard to appreciate the position of those who ask why they shall be required to hold as essential a fact or doctrine so lacking in practical or theological value.

4. Perhaps the strongest reason why some reject or doubt the fact of the Virgin Birth is that it seems to involve certain unfortunate implications, or to lie open to unfortunate misconstructions, to which the mind of our day is particularly sensitive.

a. It seems to militate against the real comradeship of Christ, and to weaken the pull and power of His example as a challenge to our living.

The Christianity of our day is peculiarly impressed with the importance of following Christ, of walking "in His steps," of obeying Him. We see in Him not only the full revelation of what God is, but also the perfect revelation of what man should be. To do as Jesus did and to be as Jesus was, is our goal.

Now, to put it bluntly, it seems to many as if the Virgin Birth gave our Lord a handicap, an unnatural advantage, which weakens greatly the force and reality of His example. If He started thus differently from us, then it is hard to see how He was "tempted in all points like as we are." His example becomes unreal. It is as if some winged Ariel, flitting easily from crag to crag, called to us, "If I can climb the mountain, why cannot you?" It seems a real and a great loss, if thus we lose the reality of the human example and companionship of Jesus, the challenge of His perfect obedience and hard won victory.

b. The Virgin Birth seems also to be somewhat closely entangled with one of the most false and harmful ideas which have persistently haunted the mind of man—the notion that the sex life is naturally unclean or sinful, and that virginity is higher, purer, more acceptable to God, than is married life.

Think of the immense emphasis laid on the superior virtue of virginity in the Roman Catholic Church, the celibacy of the clergy, and of monks and nuns, going right along with the exaltation of the

virgin mother. One can understand why Romanists should defend the Virgin Birth. It fits their ideal of life. But we Protestants reject the whole theory of the superiority of virginity. We believe that wedded love is essentially pure and holy, as holy as anything to be found on God's earth. We believe our children spring out of something beautiful and Godlike, not something sinful and shameful.

Farseeing and right-minded educators are trying to bring about a healthier and truer view of sex and of sex relations than has obtained in the past. Can it be wondered at if they hesitate to accept the view of our Lord's birth which seems to lend itself to sanctioning the ancient view that virginity is purer than marriage, and that there is something inherently unclean about normal wedded life? Of course the Virgin Birth does not necessarily put a stigma upon normal marriage; it may be used to glorify it; but, when the matter seems to be at all in doubt, it is not strange that the healthy mind of our time, in its strong reaction against the morbid ideas of sex that have prevailed so long, naturally prefers to believe that our Lord came in a way to sanction our normal human life and relationships.

These reasons are strong, and are worthy of respectful and sympathetic consideration.

### *Things That Should Not Be Said*

It is not within the province of such a brief and popular summary as this to draw conclusions. But certain suggestions come to us all from a review of these facts.

a. In view of these facts, no one should say that the stories about the birth of Jesus are one in kind with the stories of the intercourse of Greek gods with women, or other stories of miraculous birth. It is sufficient to read these stories and catch their tone, and then read the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, to see that they are as far apart as the stars are from the light of a smouldering garbage heap.

b. No one should say, or imply, that those who

hold to the Virgin Birth are blindly clinging to an irrational tradition. Strong reasons support their position, as we have seen.

c. No one should say that those who reject or are unable to affirm the Virgin Birth are unbelievers, or hold a low view of the deity of our Lord. They have their strong reasons, as we have seen, reasons which do not involve any lack of sound faith in our Lord's perfect deity.

d. No one should say that the alternative to acceptance of the Virgin Birth is the belief that our Lord was an illegitimate child. Those who are constrained to doubt the fact of the Virgin Birth believe that our Lord was born of the pure and loving wedlock of two pure and loving parents, chosen of the Lord for their high privilege. They are as ready to affirm faith in His sinless conception and holy birth as are those who hold the accepted position.

### *A Simple Conclusion*

One cannot say what another should decide on the basis of these facts. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." But there is a simple conclusion to which we are all irresistibly drawn by these facts, taken together. It is that all of us should be extremely patient, considerate, open-minded, fair; slow to pass judgment, generous each to the other's position. The Church should be careful about declaring essential a fact with regard to which so many devout souls have serious and strong objections. Still more should all be careful not to treat lightly a fact so closely interwoven with the life and faith of the Church through all the ages.

It is a time for considerateness, tolerance, fair-mindedness, readiness to wait and confer and study and think. Above all, it is a time for exercising the Golden Rule, and keeping the one great commandment, that we love one another.

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